Kevin Vallier:

All the Kingdoms of the World (On Radical Religious Alternatives to Liberalism)

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Let me start with a showbiz story. At the end of October 2024, a Czech tabloid reported on the civil court case involving a famous Czech, Slovakia-born top model Taťána Kuchařová (Miss World 2006) and her former husband Ondřej Brzobohatý, a well-known Czech actor. Seemingly, there is nothing of scholarly interest in this case, focused on the 'airing of dirty laundry' from the ex-couple's private lives. However, one notable detail emerged. The model had chosen Ronald Němec to represent her, an attorney who had previously made headlines in Czech public life for representing then-Archbishop of Prague, Cardinal Dominik Duka.

In 2022, the Czech Constitutional Court dismissed the complaint brought by Cardinal Duka and Němec, who had demanded an apology from two theatres in Brno. They claimed a violation of their personal rights due to the staging of two controversial plays at a theatre festival, even though the Archbishop himself had not seen the performances but still found them offensive. The court ruled against Němec and his client, citing freedom of speech and artistic expression. According to the Constitutional Court, judges should not act as guardians of morality, as the plaintiffs seemed to expect.[1] Let's return to the model's case: According to the tabloid, her attorney Němec made quite an impression in court with his demeanour. He reportedly came across as very self-assured, even arrogant, frequently asserting the primacy of

ecclesiastical (i.e. canon) law over other laws, which, as the article's author Lukáš Vltavský remarked, is 'quite bold in a country with one of the highest atheist populations in the world. And frankly, quite irritating'. Němec went further, openly questioning the credibility of the opposing lawyer, Robert Vladyka, saying, 'You're not credible to us; you're not a Catholic.' After the hearing, Němec clarified his statement to the tabloid press: 'I didn't mean it disrespectfully. I just wanted to point out that, from the perspective of canon law, he doesn't meet all the qualifications required for the role, which, among other things, includes being baptized.'[2]

This rather bizarre Central European case seems like a fitting introduction to this review of the recent book by political theorist Kevin Vallier, which addresses this trend in political and legal theory—a trend that can broadly be described as Catholic integralism. In a nutshell, as Vallier aptly describes, integralism is based on the idea that' [t]he church has the right to rule the baptized, the state has the right to govern its citizens, and the church has the right to direct the state in a confined range of cases. (...) Whatever form the state takes, an integralist regime is one where the state submits to the church. (...) Such submission also implies a certain degree of integration between church and state; their constitutions, laws, and procedures aim at a certain harmony. Society is thus dually governed: it has a governing dyarchy. The ideal integralist government is a successful dyarchy. Church and state effectively advance their aspects of the common good' (p. 34). 'Integralism's moral standard is the whole common good: natural and supernatural, temporal and eternal, earthly and heavenly' (p. 33). 'Integralists think that governments should reinforce some conciliar legislation and papal decretals. They affirm the church's supreme legal authority, and they would make such authority palpable for entire societies' (p. 43).

The champion of this movement, especially within American jurisprudence, is Harvard law professor Adrian Vermeule, a Catholic convert who has coined the term 'common good constitutionalism' (Vermeule, 2022), known not only for his admiration of Carl Schmitt's ideas but also for his habit of blocking dissenters on the social network X – assuming he's active there and not taking one of his regular breaks. Vallier briefly mentions Vermeule within the first few pages of his book, placing him within the broader integralist family.

As the description of this latest intellectual movement suggests, Catholic integralism can be seen as a radical, reactionary response to postmodernism and the recently dominant social liberalism. It is a continuation of the dream of 'unity between throne and altar', a notion that has been present in some marginal Catholic conservative circles for several years now, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Sekerák, 2015). Not long ago, these ideas defended by a minority of reactionary thinkers could have been dismissed with an ironic smile or brushed aside with a wave of the hand as 'political Catholicism is, *ipso facto*, dependent on social support; in democratic states, its goals could hardly be

realized without such backing from society' (Šabatka, 2009, p. 74). However, such dismissal is no longer an option, given that integralism is a rising ideational current – not only in American intellectual circles, as demonstrated by the unusual, though illustrative, Czech case mentioned at the beginning of this review.

Integralists, Vermeule included, are rightfully self-confident. Euro-Atlantic societies seem weary – if not outright disillusioned – with the freedoms and opportunities liberal democracy offers, particularly with what some call the 'ideology of human-rightism' (Míčka, 2017; David, 2020) or 'human rights fundamentalism' (Kinley, 2007).[3] As a result, society is reaching for various alternatives. Christian – or, more specifically, Catholic – integralism is one of them, alongside post-liberalism and national conservatism (itself strongly rooted in religious traditions). And let's be honest – it's one of the more bizarre options. Integralists dream of a social and political order not far removed from medieval Christianity, which, as Rawls (1996, xxiii) aptly noted, 'was an expansionist religion of conversion that recognized no territorial limits to its authority short of the world as a whole'. Their goal, as Vallier reminds us, 'is not gradualism but counterrevolution' (p. 131) or, differently put, it is 'victory, not compromise' (p. 17). Paradoxically, they strive to pursue such a vision despite the fact that 'Catholicism has 5,600 bishops from nations and cultures worldwide, and none openly affirms integralism. No pope has embraced integralism since Pius X' (p. 140).

In his book, Vallier takes integralist arguments seriously, engaging with them thoughtfully and in great depth, including those related to the Church-authorized state assisting the (particular) Catholic Church and its hierarchs 'by devising coercive policies' (p. 98). Although he admits at the beginning of the second chapter that he is not Catholic but sympathetic to Orthodox Christianity, Vallier demonstrates an impressive command of Catholic intellectual traditions. His knowledge of ecclesial history and canon law is both breathtaking and admirable – qualities essential to exploring a movement grounded in Catholic doctrine, even if it selectively picks the aspects that suit its purposes. Since this review is published in the *Czech Journal of Political Science* and opened with a story from the Czech context, I would like to highlight that Vallier's book also includes several references to Jan Hus.

For many of its proponents, 'integralism may describe a feasible ideal', as Vallier correctly notes (p. 92), however unreasonable or even unacceptable this may seem to those who do not support it. While I agree with most of Vallier's arguments and fully sympathize with his appeal in the epilogue for 'a self-critical and tolerant liberalism that welcomes the formation of broad political coalitions' and 'collaboration between the liberal Right and Left' (p. 274), I will now take issue with some of his claims and even play the role of *advocatus diaboli* where needed. This may help us to reflect more deeply on the case of integralism and its proponents.

As mentioned above, the integralist state is envisioned as a 'prolonged', se-

cular arm[4] of the local Church. Let me emphasize this aspect of locality or particularity, as it is not only highly improbable but also legally impossible to create a universal integralist state or to expect that such an idea would be globally embraced or even endorsed by the papacy. While it is conceivable that some future popes might sympathize with this idea, it remains unlikely.[5] By particularity, I mean individual churches, i.e. those 'in which and from which the one and only Catholic Church exists, are first of all dioceses, to which, unless it is otherwise evident, are likened a territorial prelature and territorial abbacy, an apostolic vicariate and an apostolic prefecture, and an apostolic administration erected in a stable manner', as described in Can. 368 of the *Code of Canon Law* (in Latin, *Codex Iuris Canonici*; hereinafter, CIC).

In an integralist regime, a dyarchic model of Church-state relations is applied, as noted earlier. Vallier suggests that '[d]yarchies cannot dispel private judgment. Citizens must still use private judgment to decide whether to obey the law in cases where it seems to require sin' (p. 190). However, if I understand the model correctly, it assumes the moral superiority of the Church and the primacy of the CIC. It is difficult to imagine that the Church would ever compel the state's citizens to sin in any way.[6] But even if the state were to do so – given that those who govern are themselves sinful and fallible, and thus capable of producing sinful laws – the CIC would still take precedence over any secular law. This prioritization could effectively prevent both morally wrongful actions and the dilemma for citizens regarding whether to obey a law that may lead them to sin. This brings us to the idea that something like judicial review can exist in integralist regimes. This could presuppose that secular laws must be compatible with the CIC, and that canonical tribunals can pursue this in the same way constitutional (or supreme) courts do in many democratic countries.

In any case, let us remind that in the past there were numerous conflicts between religious and secular authority, such as the Investiture Contest, the creation of the Avignon papacy, and the English Reformation, as Vallier enumerates them (p. 185). It should be remarked that these situations have placed not only individuals but entire nations in a rather tricky moral dilemma regarding which authority takes precedence. It is not unlikely that the dyarchic model in an integralist regime could provoke similar situations once again.

Although Vallier effectively questions integralists and their ideas, he presupposes that they 'are loyal to the Catholic Church alone' (p. 136). I am somewhat sceptical about that. Let's imagine that a strongly liberal pope is elected who supports not only institutional but also social liberalism; some of his views might even be labelled 'woke'. I assume integralists could not only oppose such a pope but also challenge his authority and legitimacy, much as some 'RadTrads' (i.e., radical traditionalists) do today with Pope Francis. Furthermore – and this is even more significant – no post-Vatican II Catholic can sincerely adhere to integralist principles without abandoning a substantial part of the Church's teaching, which do not fa-

vour any integralist political schemes. I think even Vallier himself is aware of this when he refers to the integralist fidelity to Church teaching as 'purported' (p. 215). If integralists were to at some point distance themselves from loyalty to the Church and its Supreme Pontiff, they could endanger their own salvation. They would find themselves in a paradoxical situation: they would respect the state authorities of the integralist regime, but parallelly question the ecclesiastical ones, at least some of them. Let us remind that in *Lumen gentium* Council Fathers declared that 'the Church, now sojourning on earth as an exile, is necessary for salvation. (...) Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved' (para. 14). By questioning papal authority, a Catholic effectively distances herself from the ecclesial community, even though she formally remains in the Church and has not been excommunicated.

Anyway, the above-cited statement has nothing to do with any political regime. It concerns only the issue of salvation, an area in which the state is not expected to intervene. Any decision related to personal salvation is entrusted to the individual and depends on his/her earthly deeds. Furthermore, the Fathers teach elsewhere that '[t]he Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system. She is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person. The Church and the political community in their own fields are autonomous and independent from each other' (*Gaudium et spes*, para. 76). Obviously, the dyarchic model proposed by integralists can hardly be endorsed by the Church.

Thus, I really wonder whether an integralist Catholic truly aligns her conscience with official Catholic teaching in this regard. It should be added, though, that she may still legitimately oppose political liberalism, her archenemy, even invoking certain post-conciliar statements critical of liberalism, such as the one by St. Paul VI in his apostolic letter *Octogesima Adveniens*, where he noted that 'we are witnessing a renewal of the liberal ideology. This current assert itself both in the name of economic efficiency, and for the defense of the individual against the increasingly overwhelming hold of organizations, and as a reaction against the totalitarian tendencies of political powers. Certainly, personal initiative must be maintained and developed. But do not Christians who take this path tend to idealize liberalism in their turn, making it a proclamation in favour of freedom? They would like a new model, more adapted to present-day conditions, while easily forgetting that *at the very root of philosophical liberalism is an erroneous affirmation of the autonomy of the individual in his activity, his motivation and the exercise of his liberty*. Hence, the liberal ideology likewise calls for careful discernment on their part' (para. 35, italics added).

When criticizing integralist assumptions, Vallier occasionally resorts to arguments that are not always convincing or logically sound. For example, he argues that '[o]nce the state learns that

Catholicism is the true religion, it faces trade-offs. It must choose between building hospitals and establishing inquisitorial courts. In some cases, it chooses health. In others, it chooses the true religion' (p. 111). In my view, this presents a false dichotomy. An integral Catholic state would likely indeed place great emphasis on enforcing norms among its baptized Catholic members (as Vallier analyzes in depth elsewhere), but the form of such enforcement can vary. It should certainly avoid physical coercion or punishment, as that would contradict the Church's moral teachings. However, adhering to religious norms, including dogma, does not mean abandoning its social role, especially considering that such a state would likely apply Catholic Social Doctrine in its social policies – a point with which not only integralists but many other Catholics would likely agree.

This pertains also to another point. Vallier assumes that integralist states will have to sacrifice or at least reduce their economic growth. 'A nonintegralist state will grow far wealthier than the integralist order within a century. The nonintegralist order can better fight poverty and guarantee healthcare. The stabilization costs to integralism include the opportunity costs of the regime's other priorities', he claims (p. 197). In my opinion, this is a mistaken prediction. Let us assume that the integralist regime will conscientiously adhere to Catholic Social Doctrine, that its citizens will be relatively consistent moral agents preferring honesty and integrity in economic interactions, and that the main principles of business ethics will be thoroughly applied and enforced by the state. In such a case, it is reasonable to expect that integralist regimes would be competitive enough with their non-integralist counterparts, and perhaps even more economically efficient, thereby better contributing to the well-being of their citizens.

In the above-mentioned dichotomy, Vallier mentions the alleged need to establish inquisitorial courts. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that an integralist state would establish such tribunals or anything similar. Even the Vatican City State, which is not only a Catholic state *par excellence* but also an elected absolute monarchy, has no such thing as an inquisitorial court. Its own judicial system is nothing of the sort. Similarly, the judicial system of the Roman Curia, represented by the Apostolic Penitentiary, the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura, and the Tribunal of the Roman Rota, bears no resemblance to anything of that nature.

Vallier assumes that an integralist regime could function democratically. He also points out that '[i]f nonintegralists can vote and run for office, integralist democracies will destabilize. Voters may oppose integralist arrangements on many grounds. They will push their leaders to shed integralist constraints, even constitutional limitations. Anticipating democratic machinations, some integralists recommend restricting voting rights to Catholics' (p. 185). If I were an integralist theorist, I would propose an even stricter restriction on voting rights, specifically tying this right to active sacramental life, particularly regular participation in the Sacrament

of Penance and the Eucharist. Of course, this would apply only if a believer were mentally capable of doing so. However, I assume that a believer who is mentally incapable of receiving the Sacrament of Penance would hardly be able to exercise her franchise. Naturally, every regime maintains its stability, and it does so through various measures. In an integralist regime, this seems to be a conceivable condition for the exercise of voting rights. Moreover, it would have a strong motivational aspect for non-Catholics: those who wish to fully benefit from democracy would have to become Catholics through baptism and live a regular sacramental life. This would ensure their path to salvation, which would hold immeasurably greater significance for their lives than merely participating in democratic governance.

As a self-appointed devil's advocate, I feel obliged to defend at least one other point Vallier criticizes within an integralist theoretical scheme – namely, the notion of absolute Catholic obedience to canon law regardless of the behaviour of prelates. Vallier deems this stance 'perverse' (p. 220). I fully understand the author's disgust or outrage, but this has nothing to do with integralist ideas as such. It is an orthodox Catholic principle to align with Church teaching and to respect both its norms and hierarchical leaders. This has been reiterated many times in conciliar and post-conciliar documents. For example, *Lumen gentium* states that '[b]ishops, teaching in communion with the Roman Pontiff, are to be respected by all as witnesses to divine and Catholic truth. In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent' (para. 25).

Even the CIC explicitly states that '[c]onscious of their own responsibility, the Christian faithful are bound to follow with Christian obedience those things which the sacred pastors, inasmuch as they represent Christ, declare as teachers of the faith or establish as rulers of the Church' (can. 212). This obligation, naturally, extends to the *Code of Canon Law* itself, as it has been promulgated by the Supreme Pontiff and amended by his legitimate successors. Similarly, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reinforces this obligation, teaching that the faithful 'have the duty of observing the constitutions and decrees conveyed by the legitimate authority of the Church. Even if they concern disciplinary matters, these determinations call for docility in charity' (para. 2037).

St. John Paul II is even more emphatic when it comes to Catholics' respect for their pastors and alignment with the Church's teachings: 'While exchanges and conflicts of opinion may constitute normal expressions of public life in a representative democracy, moral teaching certainly cannot depend simply upon respect for a process: indeed, it is in no way established by following the rules and deliberative procedures typical of a democracy. *Dissent,* in the form of carefully orchestrated protests and polemics carried on in the media, *is opposed to ecclesial communion and to a correct understanding of the hierarchical constitution of the People of God.* Opposition to the teaching of the Church's Pastors cannot be seen as a legitimate

expression either of Christian freedom or of the diversity of the Spirit's gifts. When this happens, the Church's Pastors have the duty to act in conformity with their apostolic mission, insisting that *the right of the faithful* to receive Catholic doctrine in its purity and integrity must always be respected' (*Veritatis splendor*, para. 113; italics in original). One could object that such a view should be read in the historical context in which the Pope felt obliged to defend the Church's (and his own) authority against numerous public dissenters from within. It remains, however, a valid teaching of the Church, even though it was not pronounced *ex cathedra*.

Vallier concludes his book with an illuminating chapter on Confucianism and Islam, or more accurately, some of their quasi-integralist currents. Let me confess that it taught me a lot. Although valuable for the information provided, this chapter seems more like a mandatory supplement, intended to make the entire text better align with its title. In fact, the core focus is on Catholicism, where the author's expertise is undoubtedly strong.

What I consider to be at least an idealistic or romantic notion is the author's proposal presented to integralists in the book's epilogue. Vallier calls for the creation of small integralist republics modelled after the Monastic Republic of Mount Athos. I am not sure whether such a compromise would satisfy the integralists, although I understand the author's motives that led him to formulate it, albeit only very briefly outlined. After all, integralists are integralists not only because they want to embrace their (Catholic) faith in an integral way but also because they want to subjugate the state to ecclesiastical norms in a complex, integral manner. They have set out to change the current liberal-democratic regime according to their vision and will do whatever it takes to achieve that. They do not aspire to become a marginalized group, a 'small republic' excluded from the rest of the population, to which – in the best case – people will come to observe like animals in a zoo.

Having begun this review essay with a quote from Czech tabloid press, allow me to conclude with cite one of the Czech's obscure Catholic websites, titled – and here comes the surprise – Integral Catholics. In the 'About Us' section (last updated August 9, 2014), one can read: 'Integral Catholics view all issues – theological, moral, political, social, and legal – through the lens of the Church's tradition, which transmits the truths revealed by God – Catholic faith. 'Without faith, it is impossible to please God' (Heb 11:6), therefore the integrity of faith is so important. [...] The state can impose order through repression, surveillance, and punishment for crimes (if they are discovered), or through the propaganda of good (but how can it know what is good when it denies the existence of an objective moral order?). One thing is certain: the less virtuous people are, the more totalitarian the state must be to maintain order'.[7] That's a bit scary, isn't it?

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Endnotes:

1 https://www.christnet.eu/zpravy/31231/kardinal_duka_a_pravnik_nemec_nevysoudili_omluvu_od_divadel_us_stiznost_zamitl.url

2 https://www.super.cz/clanek/celebrity-myten-soud-vyhrajeme-chlubil-se-cirkevni-pravnik-kucharove-advokata-brzobohateho-pote-urazil-protoze-neni-katolik-1509271

3 One of the most prominent political critics of the alleged 'human-rightism' is former Czech President Václav Klaus. In one of his numerous public speeches, he noted: 'I feared – but insufficiently – the gradual shifting away from civil rights to human rights. I did not see the power of the ideology of human-rightism and did not anticipate the consequences of it. Human-rightism has nothing in common with practical issues of individual freedom and free political discourse. It is about entitlements, claims, positive discrimination and political correctness'. https://www.klaus.cz/clanky/3209

4 I adopt this term from Vallier himself, as I deem it a well-suited and clear expression of the state's role under an integralist political regime.

5 Moreover, as Vallier emphasizes, '[t]he college of cardinals might elect an integralist pope, but future popes may disagree' (p. 197). This illustrates not only the papal power to (re)shape the overall course of the Church and even its doctrine (in some cases), but also that integralists, in pursuing their vision, can hardly rely on Rome – at least in the long term.

6 Of course, there have been instances in history where Church authority has been involved in policies or actions that could be considered morally dubious (e.g., the Inquisition, forced conversions, etc.). This does not necessarily invalidate the Church's moral authority, but we should consider this historical context to avoid overgeneralizing about the Church's infallibility or its inability to err.

7 https://www.ikatolici.cz/integralni-katolici/